

SERMON: 23 February 2020 – Rev Brenda Robson

“Transfiguration”

(Matthew 17:1-9 and 2 Peter 1:16-21)

I want you to imagine walking up a big hill or a mountain alone. But it's no ordinary mountain. The ground beneath you is shaking and the entire mountain is covered with smoke. At its peak is a thick cloud with lightning and thunder. God descends onto the mountain in fire and each time you speak to him, he responds in thunder. This is what Moses experienced in Exodus 19.

Now compare that to your last time in prayer! Were you distracted, feeling obliged to pray, was it ordinary, were we keen to get away and get on with other things?

These thoughts wouldn't have entered Moses' mind on the way up the mountain!

Somewhere along the way we have lost the wonder and the awe and the excitement of the presence of God, the shocking has become ordinary.

Moses appears on a mountain again in the New Testament with Jesus and Elijah in what we call the transfiguration. An event so awesome and shocking and unimaginable, that those who witnessed it would never forget it.

Up to this point, Jesus' friends saw him a man, looking very much like them. They knew he was special because he did special things. They had heard his teaching and observed miracles of healing and deliverance and resurrection. They were coming to the end of Jesus' three year ministry.

They were beginning to grasp a small measure of who Jesus was. Six days before the Transfiguration Jesus had asked his disciples “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” (Matthew 16:13). They replied ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

But they still saw with their eyes the human Jesus. When Jesus lead them up a high mountain, he was going to give them a glimpse of his glory, a glimpse of the very glory of God, a glimpse of heaven.

He changed before their eyes. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as light.

Mark says his clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. (Mark 9:3)

And Luke said his clothes became as white as a flash of lightning.

They struggled to find the words to express the supernatural light surrounding Jesus that appeared before Peter, James and John.

John would see Jesus exactly like this again, at the end of John's life when God gave him a vision of the heavenly realms as described in the first chapter of Revelation. (The Passion Translation)

John said - 12 When I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, I saw seven golden lampstands. 13 And walking among the lampstands, I saw someone like a son of man, wearing a full-length robe with a golden sash over his chest. 14 His head and his hair were white like wool—white as glistening snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire! 15 His feet were gleaming like bright metal, as though they were glowing in a fire, and his voice was like the roar of many rushing waters. 16 In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. And his face was shining like the brightness of the blinding sun! 17 When I saw him, I fell down at his feet as good as dead, but he laid his right hand on me and *I heard his reassuring voice saying:*

Don't yield to fear. I am the Beginning and I am the End, 18 the Living One! I was dead, but now look—I am alive forever and ever. And I hold the keys that unlock death and the unseen world.

When John heard this I'm sure he remembered that on the Mountain of Transfiguration he had fallen face down to the ground, terrified but Jesus gently touched him and said "Get up. Don't be afraid."

Now Jesus didn't take the disciples up the mountain to scare the living daylights out of them. Why did this happen?

It is widely thought that one reason might be that Jesus needed to talk to Moses and Elijah in order to get direction and encouragement from them. This is because it says in Luke's account "**Moses and Elijah appeared in glorious splendour, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure which he was about to bring to fulfilment at Jerusalem.**"

The word used for departure here is the Greek word "exodos" like our word exodus. Of course, the word exodus had one special meaning for the Jewish people, the departure of Israel from slavery in Egypt, the unknown way through the desert to the Promised Land, the utter trust in God that was necessary for the journey.

Willie Barclay comments that Jesus was about to embark on his exodus. In utter trust in God, he was going to set out on the tremendous adventure of that final journey to Jerusalem, a journey beset with danger, a journey involving a cross but a journey ending in glory.

Was he taking the right way? Was he right to adventure out to Jerusalem and the waiting arms of the cross? Moses, the greatest law giver and Elijah the greatest prophet encouraged him to go on. And then, even greater still by far, there came the voice of his Father "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him."

Words spoken by God the Father at Jesus' baptism and the beginning of his ministry on earth; words spoken on this mountainside to signify that the end of his ministry was near.

The Mountain of Transfiguration was for Jesus a spiritual mountain peak, it was the experience there which enabled him to turn towards Jerusalem and to walk the way to the cross.

Now Jesus was accustomed to going up hillsides on his own to spend hours in prayer to his Father. He could have gone alone to meet with God and with Moses and Elijah but he deliberately took Peter and James and John.

Jesus wanted to take their understanding to a new level. He wanted them to have a glimpse of the glory to come. He took them to a higher place physically and spiritually.

Was it this experience of the glory of Jesus that helped John to stay at the cross on that Friday afternoon? Scripture suggests that he was the only disciple who didn't run away but who stayed and watched and waited. Did he realise even in a limited way that there would be triumph through the humiliation, that there would be glory in the shame, that all the blood and dirt and sweat and grime would be washed away and a whole new wonderful life would become possible beyond death and the cross?

It is often pointed out that Peter was foolish on the mountain, suggesting the building of three tents or shelters for Jesus and Moses and Elijah. But wasn't he just being human? In the confusion and fear and utter amazement, did he not just say the first thing that came into his head? When we are nervous and uncertain we can all prattle on and know we are speaking nonsense but find it hard to stop! I don't think there was any more to Peter's suggestion than this, based on his personality.

Peter certainly remembered his encounter on the mountain with Jesus because he said during his later ministry, in his second letter (2 Peter 1:16 –19 TPT)

16 We were not retelling some masterfully crafted legend when we informed you of the power and appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, for we saw his magnificence and splendour *unveiled* before our very eyes. 17 Yes, Father God lavished upon him radiant glory and honour when his distinct voice spoke out of the realm of majestic glory, endorsing him with these words: This is my cherished Son, marked by my love. All my delight is found in him! 18 And we ourselves heard that voice resound from the heavens while we were with him on the holy mountain.

19 And so we have been given the prophetic word—the *written* message of the prophets, made more reliable and fully validated *by the confirming voice of God on the Mount of Transfiguration*. And you will continue to do well if you stay focused on it. *For this prophetic message* is like a piercing light shining in a gloomy place until the dawning of a new day when the Morning Star rises in your hearts.

We can see how important that experience on the mountain was for Peter, how it shaped his faith and his understanding and his ministry. It was an experience that

undoubtedly helped him to face the cross himself and to be willing to die for what he knew to be true, that death is not the end but a glorious new beginning.

At a funeral a couple of weeks ago I quoted Sir Walter Scott said “Is death the last sleep? No, it is the last and final awakening!”

I listened recently to a moving testimony of a man who had a supernatural experience of the glory of God that changed his life forever. Not a man in biblical times but very recently.

The name Natasha Ednam-Laperouse might not mean anything to you but you will probably have heard her story. She was travelling from the UK to Nice in 2016 with her father Nadim and her best friend Bethany. At the airport she bought a sandwich from Pret a Manger. She had a number of severe allergies but there was nothing to indicate that hidden in the sandwich was a considerable portion of sesame seed. She felt unwell in the airport and felt worse during the flight.

She developed breathing difficulties, she had two doses of Piritin and two epi pens but continued to deteriorate. It was harrowing listening to her father talk of the horror of what happened as passengers who were medics tried to save her.

Then Nadim said “Suddenly these five angels appeared in a yellow light, a strong soft yellow light like a candle but really intense. There was great detail in these five figures, people like you and I, in proportion, just appeared with wings on their backs, about 20 centimetres tall. There was micro detail on their wings and faces and bodies, all looking at me at once, moving around Natasha. I was so taken aback, I had never seen anything like that in my life and I never expected to see anything like that in my life. It dawned on me that it meant she might die. I tried to whoosh them away with my arm shouting “It’s not her time!” and as I did that they disappeared and Natasha died, she was gone.

Nadim said that he felt the angels came as guardians, they had a mission and a purpose, they had come to take Natasha to heaven and God had allowed him and only him to see them.

He was asked by the interviewer if the intense emotion of the situation had caused him to hallucinate but he was clear that he was an atheist with no belief in God, he had coped with severe stress in the past and had never had any experiences of hallucination. He was a grounded, successful business man whose original company designed and created Sindy dolls and Action Man dolls and My Little Pony toys. Moreover he said that he had nothing to gain by speaking about this and he realised that he risked being seen as foolish. He said **“I know it is the truth, I would die for that truth today.”**

Does that not echo the words of Peter?

Nadim and his wife had had no church connection and no faith and raised their children without faith. About a year before her death Natasha started going to a local church with a friend. A few months before she died, she had asked to be baptised.

The first Sunday after she died, Nadim went to her church for the first time and he has never stopped going.

Nadim said that previously he was self-made, arrogant, he did everything in his own strength and took the credit for his success. He was awarded an MBE for services to business, he shared platforms with Gordon Brown as Chancellor and David Cameron as Prime Minister. But he said "All that is irrelevant now, the only thing that matters is my relationship with God. I will spend the rest of my life getting to know God and Jesus better."

And one final revelation. He and his wife fought successfully to have food products labelled fully so that every ingredient is clear. Nadim was at work one day when he saw Teresa May, then Prime Minister, speaking on television at a conference and she mentioned Natasha by name and the changes in the law that had come about following her death. Nadim went downstairs to a room that was almost in darkness, he was in tears and he prayed and thanked God for his goodness and suddenly, whoosh, the room was filled with the same yellow light as before but no angels. He cried out and the light vanished again but he felt God saying to him "I hear you my child, I am with you."

Do you believe that God operates at a supernatural level today? Some Christians believe that the supernatural ended in the book of Acts.

I believe that the supernatural God is found throughout scripture.

We need to recapture a sense of awe and wonder in God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Perhaps we have become too casual in our approach to God

Maybe we have been distracted by the busyness of life.

I am speaking to myself here. Since retiring last summer I have felt lower energy levels, less motivation. Perhaps it is just an adjustment to a different pace of life having juggled so many balls for so long.

It's that midwinter feeling when there is so little daylight and no warmth in the sun, a longing for spring that is just round the corner.

It has been good to focus on the transfiguration of Jesus this past week.

I also bought a little book in January - "Reading through the bible in a year" by Nicky Gumbel. It has been good to revisit scripture I've not read in a while and to grasp once again how awesome God has been through history and continues to be today.

Let's go up the mountain every day with Jesus and see him as he truly is, in all his glory and power and majesty and love.

Amen